



Bronk, William. The Brother in Elysium: Ideas of Friendship and Society in the United States [review]

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REVIEWS

William Bronk. *The Brother in Elysium: Ideas of Friendship and Society in the United States*. New Rochelle, New York: The Elizabeth Press, 1980. (Distributed by Small Press Distribution Inc., 1784 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, California 94709.) 244 pp. \$14.00 (paperback).

The "Epistle Dedicatory" of this book sets forth plainly the author's aim: to illuminate in some measure the nature of society through "a kind of essential drama" in which three American writers, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, comment by word and deed on the subject both in its personal form of friendship and its wider form of relations within the social structure. Unfortunately for lovers of Whitman the great poet of *Leaves of Grass* comes off a very poor third, seen from Mr. Bronk's angle of vision.

Thoreau's "tragic frustration" emerges clearly as the inevitable result of both temperament and conviction. This lover of nature, himself compared unforgettably by Emerson to "an elm tree," was incapacitated for ordinary friendship, as for ordinary life, by a high, severe ideal of true relationship rather than casual commerce and an insistence on Being rather than mere doing. Integrity of life and thought brought him loneliness, misunderstanding, and eventually fame. For us, his readers, he remains a sovereign specific against a life perhaps sufficiently described as that of "a pig satisfied."

Melville, more immersed in the world of men and action, was more profoundly troubled and despaired of social justice as he did of a final answer to the inscrutable universe. Man's nature was equivocal and ambiguous, and as for God

... He keeps the middle way
None was by
When He spread the sky;
Wisdom is vain and prophecy.

Exploring the double problem in all his fiction, he came at last to feel that man was forced to share in the organic evil of the universe in order to be truly human. *Billy Budd*, his last work, written when he was 70, embodies both dilemma and a clear conviction of faith: innocence is destroyed by evil and society must accept responsibility and with it guilt, which in turn is pardoned and blessed.

Whitman, by contrast, intuited a universe of all-embracing and eternal unity, a vast similitude encompassing all diversity. Its symbol, the sea, is the symbol also of Whitman's own nature: the poet who has no identity identifies with all forms of life and action. The poet's business is to make images for the people so that they may become the men and women they should be and in so doing, create an ideal society.

Unfortunately, this presentation of Whitman (pp. 121-162) adds nothing to our previous knowledge or understanding. Worse—much worse—Mr. Bronk's prose paraphrases of *Leaves of Grass* accomplish only the ruin of the poem's beauty and

power. Poetry, after all, is different from and much more than the ideas it may embody. With Mr. Bronk's help we may see Thoreau and Melville more clearly, but to enjoy and value Whitman, we shall be well advised to stick with *Leaves of Grass*.

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Walter H. Eitner. *Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt*. Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981. xvi, 123 pp. \$18.00.

This is an attractively printed and bound volume of a little more than 100 pages, with numerous illustrations, detailed notes, and photographic reproductions. The frontispiece is from the portrait, 1880, now in the Rare Book Room of Yale University, and is certainly an excellent likeness of Whitman. The text is drawn chiefly from Whitman's *Prose Works* and from notebooks and other sources. The "jaunt" was a railway trip, much publicized, from Camden across seven states, made by Whitman and several friends in the Fall of 1879 under the sponsorship of John W. Forney, editor and publisher of the Philadelphia *Progress*, a weekly newspaper, and the occasion was a gathering of the group known as the *Old Settlers* in Lawrence, Kansas, where Forney was scheduled to make a speech. He invited a number of friends to accompany him, including Whitman; he himself was invited by the Old Settlers of Kansas, who had lived in the area 25 years and were celebrating their quarter-centennial.

After the celebration in Lawrence, the Whitman party went on to Denver, and from there made excursions into the Rocky Mountains, including a trip by rail to the summit of Kenosha Peak, from which the view was impressive. Whitman admired "the plentitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammelled play of primitive Nature." The poet had wanted to visit Leadville and left the impression that he had done so, but he wisely gave it up as too difficult. Instead, he explored the city of Denver and recorded his impressions, many of them later to be published in *Specimen Days*, not always it appears with complete accuracy, but with enthusiasm. Of the area he said he felt that "in all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon" he had found the law of his own poems. It pleased him and satisfied his vanity to speak of his poems in this fashion, but any careful reader will be convinced that this poetry was put together with considerable care.

He and his companions had stayed only one night in Denver, but Whitman pretended that he had remained several days there. On the train the next day, heading south with the vast mountain ridge in view, he thought they presented "the most spiritual show of objective Nature" he had ever beheld. Although he expected to stop in St. Louis on the way home for only a few days, he actually stayed more than six weeks. When he finally got back to Camden he found a check for \$100 from James T. Fields, which he said came in handy. He arrived in Philadelphia on 5 January 1880, and the next day the papers carried a story of his return, which probably was written by himself, for he was his own best press agent.

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FLOYD STOVALL